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'Those Who Cling in Queer Corners To The Forgotten Tongues and Memories of an Elder Day': J.R.R. Tolkien, Finns and Elves

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In November 1914, J.R.R. Tolkien delivered a literary paper to the Sundial Society of Corpus Christi College, Oxford 'On the Kalevala or In Land of Heroes' in which he both introduced and explored for his listeners a body of relatively new mythology which he himself had first read several years before. In late 1916 while he was recuperating from his active duty in World War One Tolkien would embark on the invention of his own body of mythology (itself taken from various fragments of poetry and language invention that he had started as early as spring 1915) by writing on one of his notebooks 'The Cottage of Lost Play which introduceth [the] Book of Lost Tales' (*Lost Tales I*, p. 13). In this paper I want to use the earliest version of Tolkien's talk from November 1914 on the *Kalevala*, published in the recent edition *The Story of Kullervo* edited by Verlyn Flieger, to explore how several themes and elements that Tolkien found attractive in the *Kalevala* would find their way into the 'lit' of the textual and thematic structure of his own early mythology and the intertwined 'lang' of his earliest Elvish language invention. In his talk, Tolkien characterized the Finns of the *Kalevala* as 'those who cling in queer corners to the forgotten tongues and memories of an Elder Day' (*Kullervo*, p. 69) and in this paper I want to draw some comparisons between those Finns, their myths and legends, and Tolkien's Elves and their Lost Tales.

In his *Kalevala* talk, Tolkien introduces his listeners to the main subject of his paper by framing it as a discovery or exploration that occurs after one explores other forms of mainly European myth and legend: 'Then perhaps you discover the Kalevala. the Land of Heroes' (*Kullervo*, p. 68) Tolkien says going on to suggest that the reader of the *Kalevala* will 'feel like Columbus on a new Continent or Thorfinn the Good in Vinland' (*ibid*). Here Tolkien is evoking the names of two great discoverers of new lands; the well-known discoverer of the 'new world' Christopher Columbus and the lesser known 11th century Icelander and merchant Thorfinn Karlsefni who in 'The Saga of the Greenlanders' and 'Erik the Red's Saga' did not so much discover a new land as follow the path that Leif Erikson had originally discovered to 'the new world' of Vinland which Thorfinn subsequently attempted to colonize (see *Kullervo*, p. 93).

Tolkien follows this statement by casting himself in the role of an explorer who goes on a journey and comes upon the land, people and myths that the *Kalevala* contains: 'That is how it was for me when I first read the *Kalevala* – that is, crossed the gulf between the Indo-European speaking peoples of Europe into the smaller realm' (69). Tolkien's framing of his description to his listeners of how he encountered the *Kalevala* is somewhat suggestive of a portal fantasy framework where one goes from a primary world space into a secondary world through some type of threshold, gate or portal (a closet, a mirror, or in this case (and in several others) crossing a body of water (see Mendlesohn 2008, pp. 1-59). Tolkien suggests this with such phrases as 'crossing the gulf' (69) and entering 'a smaller realm' (*ibid*). A framework structure that Tolkien would use in his own mythology by having his invented Germanic mariner Ottor Wáfre cross over the sea and encounter the Elves of Tol-Eressëa; exiles who spoke an ancient tongue and through their lost tales clung to memories of their elder day of their own mythology. Indeed, not only would Tolkien anticipate his actual narrative frame-structure in his *Kalevala*

talk, but he would also mythologize the very process by which the *Kalevala* itself was created. In his talk Tolkien characterizes the Finns as having 'always been fond of ballads' (74) and Tolkien states 'as the ballads now bewail: 'The songs are songs of bygone ages / hidden words of ancient wisdom, / songs which all the children sing nor / all beyond men's comprehension/ in these ages of unfortune/ when the race is near its ending' (ibid). In a similar way Ottor Wæfre would encounter and hear the oral tales of the Elves which also told of bygone ages and were told by a people whose race was also near its ending; exemplified by the Elves waiting for the great 'faring forth' that will lead them back to Valinor. In origin, the *Kalevala* stories, or runos, were themselves the product of oral tales that had been heard and recorded by many collectors; most notably the Finnish author and folklorist Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884). Like the original form of the runos of the *Kalevala*, the Lost Tales were also in origin oral and told to Ottor by several Elves (such as Rúmil and Meril-i-Turingi) comparable to the rune-singers that Lönnrot and others heard and recorded the Finnish tales from. Moreover, like Lönnrot, Ottor would eventually set these tales down which his half-Elvish son Heorrenda would use as the basis for his written work 'The Golden Book of Heorrenda being the book of The Tales of Tavrobel'.

Regarding these 'song of bygone days' (74) Tolkien remarks in his talk 'but the remarkable and delightful thing is these have not been tinkered with. (70)' Which leads to the second element of Tolkien's passion for the *Kalevala* which helped shape the thematic feel of his own mythology. Again and again in his *Kalevala* talk Tolkien emphasizes his pleasure in the *Kalevala*'s sense of primitiveness and newness; which is why you don't just read the runos – you discover them. Tolkien explores this 'newness' from several different aspects. There is the form that the *Kalevala* is written in which Tolkien characterizes not as a 'national Finnish Epic' (70) but as 'a mass of conceivably epic material' (ibid); that is material which has the potential to be

'epic' but which has kept its sense of primitiveness and newness because it had not been epically handled (as in the stories of Homer). Tolkien also characterizes the *Kalevala* as 'a collection of mythological ballads full of the very primitive undergrowth that the literature of Europe has on the whole been cutting away and reducing for centuries' (71). Suggesting what the writer and folklorist Andrew Lang's previous characterization of the *Kalevala* in his 1893 work *On Custom and Myth* in terms of 'its fresh and simple beauty of style, its worth as a storehouse of every kind of primitive folklore being as it is the production of the Ur-volk' (Lang 2011, p. 407). Moreover, in his *Kalevala* talk Tolkien says: 'When you discover the Kalevala you are once in a new world' (69) but contrasts this with the statement that while some things in the 'new world' may seem familiar to the reader - 'mountains, grass, rivers, plants, animals and 'the wild ferocious human species' (ibid) Tolkien then adds that things seeming real and familiar will actually be quite different. For example he states 'trees will group differently on the horizon, the birds will make un-familiar music' (69). In the later 1918 version of this talk that Tolkien wrote but probably did not give (see *Kullervo*, p. 64) Tolkien adds to this the evocative phrase 'glamour of strangeness' (101). When Ottor comes to Tol-Eressëa in 'The Cottage of Lost Play' he too has come to an island that has the familiar landmarks of woods, hills, hamlets and good towns. Indeed, he could be walking in the very familiar English countryside (and in a way he is!). But there is also a sense that within this familiarity of the countryside there is a strangeness to this place; which Tolkien describes as 'to me it has the air of holding many secrets of old and wonderful and beautiful things' (*Lost Tales I*, p. 14). This sense of strangeness becomes compounded when Ottor encounters the *Mar Vanwa Tyaliéva* The Cottage of Lost Play - 'that this was Mar Vanwa Tyaliéva or the Cottage of Lost Play, and at that name he wondered greatly' (ibid); the small dwelling that redolent of another much later magic space from a current mythos was bigger on the inside than the outside. Tolkien also emphasizes this sense of newness in the

very Lost Tales the Elves tell him: 'To these words did Eriol's mind so lean, for it seemed to him that a new world and very fair was opening to him, that he heard naught else till he was bidden by Vairë to be seated. (15)' Moreover, at the start of 'The Music of the Ainur' the Elf Rúmil says to Ottor 'Hear now things that have not been heard among Men' (48) and after Ottor hears the Elvish creation story he remarks 'Great are these tidings and very new and strange in my ears' (64). Indeed, throughout *The Book of Lost Tales* there is an emphasis on Ottor's perception of the myths he is being told as new.

Tolkien also thematically matches the process he describes for becoming familiar with the newness and strangeness of the *Kalevala* with Ottor becoming familiar with the Elves of Tol-Eressëa. Tolkien states in his *Kalevala* talk that after discovering this new world and 'you have got on speaking terms with the natives, you will find it rather jolly to live with this strange people and these new gods' (69). As explored above, in *The Book of Lost Tales*, Ottor starts off being amazed about his strange surroundings but he quickly is on 'speaking terms' with the Elves: 'As they ate Eriol fell into speech with Lindo and his wife telling them tales of his old days and his adventures' (*Lost Tales I*, p. 17) and within the course of the narrative he will soon encounter new Gods when the Elf Lore-Master Rúmil tells him of the Music of the Ainur and the Valar who come into Arda. Moreover, in his talk Tolkien says some of the *Kalevala's* 'queer troglodyte stories' are about 'the wild jugglings with the sun and the moon and the origins of the earth and shapes of Men' (*Kullervo*, p. 71); all three myths that will be related in the oral Lost Tales the Elves tell Ottor.

But when we look for a more direct link between the Finns of the *Kalevala* and the Elves that Ottor Wáfre encounters then the dominant inspiration and influence rests in the language that the characters of the *Kalevala* spoke, Finnish; a language that several Tolkien scholars have explored as having a

profound influence on the phonetic make-up of Tolkien's early Elvish language, Qenya. Indeed it is this earliest form of Qenya that the Finnish influence in terms of sound-sense and vocabulary appears most dominant. Some of the key earliest Qenya base roots come from the invented names of people, places and items that Tolkien invented for his adaptation of the *Kalevala* story-cycle 'Kullervo'; which Tolkien started roughly a month before he first gave this talk (see *Kullervo*, pp. xxi-xxiii). Tolkien devotes an entire section of his *Kalevala* talk to the Finnish language; characterizing it, no doubt from his personal experience (which I can very much relate to) as 'the most difficult in Europe' (76) and 'a language separated by a quite immeasurable gulf in method and expression from English (77).' Tolkien goes on to explain this by stating that Finnish is 'a language of a type altogether more primitive than most in Europe. It still partakes of a flexible fluid unfixed state inconceivable in English.' (ibid) This last statement is almost a direct quote from C.N.E. Eliot's 1890 *Finnish Grammar*; the text Tolkien attempted to learn Finnish from with when he was an undergraduate at Exeter College, Oxford (he is recorded as borrowing this text from the Exeter College Fellows library at three different times). Here again, as in the context of the tales, we also see Tolkien's interest in another aspect of the *Kalevala's* newness; namely the Finnish language's sense of newness and primitiveness. One aspect of this primitiveness is the agglutinative nature of Finnish syntax and grammar; where prefixes, suffixes and infixes are applied to a key base root. This is also a dominant characteristic of Tolkien's early Qenya and pretty much remains so throughout the different conceptual versions of the structure of the Quenya language. In his *The Stratification of Language* the 19th century philologist Max Müller stated that language passes through several strata starting with the agglutinative and moving to the inflectional and isolating strata (1881, p. 54). Therefore Finnish and Qenya both represent the most primitive of these phases in language. Given the evidence

we have from such foundational works as 'The Qenya Lexicon', 'The Qenya Phonology' and the early chart of Qenya verb conjugations Tolkien sketched out Qenya, like Finnish, was not intended to be an easy language to learn (believe me!). Tolkien would later explore this concept in his 29 November 1931 talk 'A Secret Vice' by reciting several poetic examples showing that Qenya was an art-language invented to satisfy Tolkien's own personal linguistic aesthetic and not, as is the objective of auxiliary languages like Esperanto, to foster and simplify communication (see *Secret Vice: Tolkien on Language Invention* (2016)). In the talk Tolkien also emphasizes two specific elements of Finnish: 'vowel harmony' and the 'softening of consonants' (*Kullervo*, pp. 77-78). These characteristics are also in the make-up of Tolkien's Qenya language. Indeed, 'Vowel harmony' and 'softening of consonants' are key focuses as early as Tolkien's philological treatise 'The Qenya Phonology' published with notes and commentary in Parma *Eldalamberon* 12.

Finally, I would argue that there is another interesting link that Tolkien does not directly mention in his talk but may have been in the 'leaf-mold' of his mind when he was developing his own version of the Elves. That is the thematic link in Northern myth and legend between Finns and Elves. In his early reading of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literature, Tolkien would have encountered legends and sagas which associated the peoples of Finland with magic and supernatural beings including trolls, dwarves, giants, wizards and Elves. As the Icelandic scholar Herman Pálsson indicates in his 'The Sami People in Old Norse Literature' the term that was used to collectively describe these peoples in Old Norse – *Finnar* – in most cases describe the indigenous people of Finland; the Sami (1999, p. 30). However, in some of the Old Norse Sagas the term *Finnar* is more ambiguous and can refer to either the Sami or other Finnish peoples; including those more directly involved with the *Kalevala* such as the Karelian peoples (30-31). The reasons for the *Finnar's*

association with the supernatural came partially because, as Tolkien says in his talk, that the Finns were the last pagan peoples of Europe and many of the *Finnar* in the Old Norse Sagas are portrayed as holding on, or clinging, to their pagan beliefs. Moreover as Else Mondal explores in her work 'The Coexistence of Sami and Norse culture reflected in and interpreted by Old Norse myths' to the Norwegians and Danes the *Finnar* were the 'other' and in addition to being both practitioners and teachers of magic, they were also known as accomplished archers, huntsman and skiers (2000, p. 347). Indeed many of the names we have of Sami people in Old Norse literature are based on names having to do with snow (for example in *Heimskringla* there is a Sami leader named Snjar ('snow') and his daughter Drifa ('fresh snow')) and part of their belief in their magic powers seems to have come from their ability to glide or fly over the snow with skis. These early associations would be carried into later folklore. For examples, in Paul Henri-Mallet's 1770's *Northern Antiquities* there was a suggestion that Laplanders were actually the original Elves. Sir Walter Scott in his 'On The Fairies of Popular Superstition' suggested that the Oriental Lapps were an early group of fairies. This link would even appear in historic fiction some of which Tolkien would have been familiar with. For example, in E.R. Eddisson's 1926 historic adventure *Styrbiorn the Strong* the Norse heroes sail North to 'the unknown places of Kirialaland 'being drawn by the many tales in men's mouth's concerning the land...Finns and skin-changers do inhabit' (2011, Loc 1110)

In the Sagas the *Finnar* are also often seen as artisans and specifically crafters of magic items. For example in *Ketils saga haengs* the Sami magician Bruni makes Ketil an arrow that has magic properties and by which Ketil will defeat Gusir, King of the Sami. But the most clear example of a link between Finns and Elves in Northern Literature, and one Tolkien certainly would have known about, was the artisan or smith of Germanic myth and legend Volundr. Alaric Hall in his 2007 landmark work *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England* has

shown that the Scandinavian version of this tale was based on an Anglo-Saxon original where he was known as Weland or Wayland and is one of the few elements of Anglo-Saxon mythology that survives (especially in place names like Wayland's Smithy near Oxford). The story of Weland is found on one of the panels of the 7th century Franks casket and in such Anglo-Saxon works as *Deor*, *Waldere*, *Beowulf* and in King Alfred's Old English version of Boethius. In these tales he is known as a Germanic smith and maker of magic weapons. Around the time Tolkien first gave his *Kalevala* talk he also wrote a translation of the passage for *Waldere* in his Red Exeter College Essay book (now at the Bodleian) which describes ones of the magic swords that Weland forged, Mimung; which Tolkien renders as a work of Weland that does not fail any man who knows how to wield it. There are also several notes by Tolkien in section of the essay book about Weland (MS Tolkien A21/1). One of these tales of Weland was recorded in Old Norse as the *Völundarkviða*. It is in this work that the Old Norse version of Weland, Volundr, is described as 'a son of Finnish Kings' and 'prince of Elves' as well as 'master of Elves'. In his paper Pálsson inquires whether the word Elf (alf) could refer to the Sami and therefore Volundr is really the son of the Sami King and leader of the Elves (1999, pp. 35-36). Therefore the tradition of Weland being a great craftsman and maker of magic items might have drew him into the realm of also being a Finnar and an Elf. While he was writing *The Book of Lost Tales* Tolkien would continue to explore and attempt to build upon this link. In some notes he made (published in *Parma Eldalamberon* 15 'Early Runic Documents') he thought about making a more direct link by Volundr/Weland and his own Elvish smith Fëanor. While we can't definitely say that Tolkien had all this in his mind when he was inventing his own version of his Elves, what we can see is that there was already a soup of story in Northern Literature that equated the Finns with magical creatures such as Elves which Tolkien could mythically re-imagine and build upon.

In her recent talk at Exeter College, Oxford to launch the new *Kullervo* edition in the United Kingdom, Verlyn Flieger characterized Tolkien's early adaptation of the *Kullervo* story from the *Kalevala* as Tolkien's first attempt at constructing a secondary world intertwined with his language invention. In a sense Tolkien's early talk on the *Kalevala* can be read as a blue-print for some of the key themes and characteristics that Tolkien, when he moved from adaptor to inventor of myth, would imbue his own secondary world with. Tolkien would intertwine the discovery and exploration of Ottor Wæfre with the newness of the tales he hears from the Elves who themselves speak a language the phonetically resembles the very Finnish language of the *Kalevala*; while in the contextual background there was a Northern tradition that linked the Finns themselves with magical beings including the Elves.

And the echoes of Tolkien's description of 'Those Who Cling in Queer Corners to the Memories of of an Elder Day' would persist in Tolkien's mythology in describing Elvish things and places. As Verlyn Flieger has explored in her seminal *A Question of Time: J.R.R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie*, in the draft of the chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* in which the Fellowship visit the Elvish enclave of Lothlorien he has Frodo describe the passage into it as 'stepping over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days' (2001, p. 91).

In a later version of his *Kalevala* talk written by Tolkien c. 1918 Tolkien added 'I would that we had more of it left – something of the sort that belonged to the English' (*Kullervo*, p. 105). By the time he wrote this new line (but probably did not deliver it) the very seeds from the *Kalevala* that had inspired Tolkien had been planted in his own legendarium that he would later say he wanted to dedicate to his own country – England – seeds of ideas that he first expressed in this key talk that thanks to the scholarship and editorial work of Verlyn Flieger is available for all of us to discover and explore.

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